DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 424 037 PS 027 072

TITLE	What Should Parents and Teachers Know about Bullying?
INSTITUTION	ACCESS ERIC, Rockville, MD.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	NLE-98-2524
PUB DATE	1998-00-00
NOTE	6p.; This brochure is based on the 1997 ERIC Digest (ED 407 154), "Bullying in Schools" written by Ron Banks of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education.
CONTRACT	RK95188001
AVAILABLE FROM	ACCESS ERIC; Tel: 800-538-3742 (Toll Free; Web site: www:http://www.aspensys.com/eric/resources/parent/parent.html
PUB TYPE	Guides - Non-Classroom (055)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Adolescents; *Aggression; *Behavior Problems; *Bullying; Childhood Attitudes; Children; Elementary Secondary Education; *Intervention; Parent Role; Peer Relationship; Prevention; School Role; Teacher Role

ABSTRACT

This brochure is intended to inform parents and teachers about the nature of bullying and ways to address the problem. Questions answered in the brochure are: (1) "what is bullying?"; (2) "how extensive is bullying?"; (3) "what are some characteristics of bullying?"; (4) "what are some characteristics of victims?"; (5) "what are some consequences of bullying?" (6) "what are some perceptions of bullying?"; and (7) "what are some intervention programs?" A list of source organizations for additional information on bullying is included. (HTH)

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What Should Parents and Teachers Know About Bullying?

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Bullying in schools is a worldwide problem that can have negative effects on the general school climate and on the right of students to learn in a safe environment without fear. Bullying can also have negative lifelong consequences—both for students who bully and for their victims. This brochure characterizes bullies and their victims, offers advice on how schools and parents can prevent bullying and intervene when it becomes a problem, and suggests sources for further information.

What Is Bullying?

Bullying typically consists of direct behaviors—such as teasing, taunting, threatening, hitting, and stealing—that are initiated by one or more students against a victim or victims. In addition to direct attacks, bullying may also be indirect—such as spreading rumors that cause victims to be socially isolated through intentional exclusion. Although boys who bully typically engage in direct bullying methods, girls who bully are more apt to use more subtle, indirect strategies. Whether the bullying is direct or indirect, the key component of bullying is physical or psychological intimidation that occurs repeatedly over time to create an ongoing pattern of harassment and abuse.

How Extensive Is Bullying?

Studies have established that approximately 15 percent of students are either bullied regularly or are initiators of bullying behavior (Olweus, 1993). Direct bullying seems to increase through the elementary school years, peak in the middle school/junior high school years, and decline during the high school years. Although direct physical assault seems to decrease with age, verbal abuse appears to remain constant. School size, racial composition, and school setting (rural, suburban, or urban) do not seem to be distinguishing factors in predicting the occurrence of bullying. Finally, boys are more likely than girls to engage in bullying behavior and to be the victims of bullies.

What Are Some Characteristics of Bullies?

Students who engage in bullying behaviors seem to have a need to feel powerful and in control. They appear to derive satisfaction from inflicting injury and suffering on others, seem to have little empathy for their victims, and often defend their actions by saying that their victims provoked them in some way. Studies indicate that bullies often come from homes in which physical punishment is used, children are taught to strike out physically as a way to handle problems, and parental involvement and warmth are frequently lacking. Students who regularly display bullying behaviors are generally defiant or oppositional toward adults, are antisocial, and are apt to break school rules. Bullies appear to have little anxiety and to possess strong self-esteem. There is little evidence to support the contention that bullies victimize others because they feel bad about themselves.

What Are Some Characteristics of Victims?

Students who are victims of bullying are typically anxious, insecure, and cautious and suffer from low self-esteem, rarely defending themselves or retaliating when confronted by students who bully them. They may lack social skills and friends and thus are often socially isolated. Victims tend to be close to their parents and may have parents who can be described as overprotective. The major physical characteristic of victims is that they tend to be weaker than their peers; other physical characteristics—such as weight, dress, or wearing eyeglasses—do not appear to be

significant factors that can be correlated with victimization (Batsche and Knoff, 1994; Olweus, 1993).

What Are the Consequences of Bullying?

A strong correlation appears to exist between bullying other students during the school years and experiencing legal or criminal troubles as adults. Chronic bullies seem to continue their behaviors into adulthood, negatively influencing their ability to develop and maintain positive relationships.

Victims of bullies often fear school and consider it to be an unsafe and unhappy place. As many as seven percent of America's eighth-graders stay home at least once a month because of bullies. The act of being bullied tends to increase some students' isolation because their peers do not want to lose social status by associating with them or because their peers do not want to increase the risks of being bullied themselves. Being bullied often leads to depression and low self-esteem—problems that can continue into adulthood (Olweus, 1993; Batsche and Knoff, 1994).

What Are Some Perceptions of Bullying?

Parents are often unaware of the bullying problem and discuss it with their children only to a limited extent. Students typically feel that adult intervention is infrequent and ineffective and that telling adults will only bring more harassment from bullies. Students report that teachers seldom or never talk to their classes about bullying (Charach, Pepler, and Ziegler, 1995). School personnel may view bullying as a harmless rite of passage that is best ignored unless verbal and psychological intimidation crosses the line into physical assault or theft.

What Are Some Intervention Programs?

Effective intervention must involve the entire school community and parents, not just the perpetrators and victims of bullying. For example, Smith and Sharp (1994) emphasize the need to develop whole-school bullying policies; to implement curricular measures, such as role-playing activities and classroom discussions; to improve the school's environment; and to empower students through conflict resolution programs, peer counseling, and assertiveness training. Olweus (1993) details an anti-bullying approach that involves intervention at the school, classroom, and individual levels. It includes the following three components:

- Students, parents, teachers, and school administrators can fill out an initial questionnaire distributed by school officials. The survey should include questions designed to assess the extent of the problem, the frequency of teacher intervention, the knowledge of parents about their children's school experiences, and so forth. The results of the questionnaire should be shared with all participants, perhaps at a school assembly on bullying. The results can help students and adults become aware of the extent of the problem, can help to justify intervention efforts, and can serve as a benchmark to measure any changes in school climate. Questionnaire results can be publicized in school and community newsletters.

- Parents can participate in an awareness campaign, which can be conducted during parent-teacher conference days, through parent newsletters, and at PTA meetings. The goals are to increase parental awareness of the bullying problem and to point out the

importance of parental involvement in and support of the school's anti-bullying efforts.

- Teachers can work with students at the classroom level to develop classroom rules against bullying. Many programs engage students in a series of formal role-playing exercises and related assignments that can teach the students other methods of interaction besides bullying. These programs can also show students how they can assist victims of bullying and how everyone can work together to create a school climate where bullying is not tolerated.

Other components of anti-bullying programs can include individualized interventions with the bullies and their victims; the implementation of cooperative learning activities to reduce social isolation; and an increase in adult supervision at key bullying times, such as recess or lunch. Schools that have implemented Olweus's program have reported a 50-percent reduction in bullying.

Conclusion

Bullying is a serious problem that can affect a student's academic and social progress. A comprehensive intervention plan that involves all students, parents, and school staff can help ensure that all students can learn in a safe and fear-free environment.

Where Can I Get More Information?

The following organizations offer information on the topic of bullying as well as information about early childhood education:

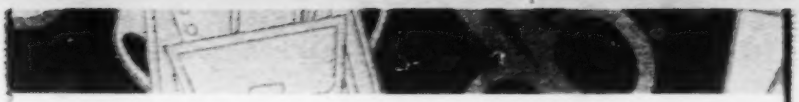
ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education
University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign
Children's Research Center
51 Gerty Drive
Champaign, IL 61820–7469
Toll Free: 800–583–4135
Phone: 217–333–1386
Fax: 217–333–3767
E-mail: ericeece@uiuc.edu
Web: http://www.ericeece.org
National Parent Information Network
Web: http://www.npin.org

Educators for Social Responsibility
23 Garden Street
Cambridge, MA 01238
Phone: 617–492–1764
Fax: 617–864–5164
Web: http://www.benjerry.com/esr/about-esr.html

National Association for the Education of Young Children
1509 16th Street NW
Washington, DC 20036–1426
Toll Free: 800–421–2460
Phone: 202–232–8777
Web: http://naeyc.org/

Sources

References identified with EJ or ED are abstracted in the ERIC database. EJ references are journal articles available at most research libraries. ED references are documents available in microfiche collections at more than 900 locations or in paper copy and, in some cases, electronically from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service at 1–800–443–ERIC (3742). Call 1–800–LET–ERIC (538–3742) for more details.



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This and other Parent Brochures are available online on the ERIC systemwide Web site (http://www.aspensys.com/eric/resources/parent/parent.html). You can call ACCESS ERIC at 1–800–LET–ERIC (538–3742) for additional free printed copies of this brochure while supplies last.

This brochure is based on the 1997 ERIC Digest *Bullying in Schools* written by Ron Banks of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education. This publication was prepared by ACCESS ERIC with funding from the Educational Resources Information Center, National Library of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under Contract No. RK95188001. The opinions expressed in this brochure do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of the U.S. Department of Education. This brochure is in the public domain. Authorization to reproduce it in whole or in part is granted.

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